

CCM PIONEER BRIDGE BUILDER THOMAS DORSEY

August 28, 2012 (David Cloud, Fundamental Baptist Information Service, P.O. Box 610368, Port Huron, MI 48061, 866-295-4143, fbns@wayoflife.org; for instructions about subscribing and unsubscribing or changing addresses, see the information paragraph at the end of the article)

The following is from the latest edition of the 400-page *Directory of Contemporary Worship Musicians* (June 20, 2012), which is available in print as well as a free eBook from the Way of Life web site.

In 1999 *CCM Magazine* labeled Thomas Dorsey a major pioneer of contemporary Christian music. “It’s entirely arguable that Christian music would not exist if it were not for the Rev. Thomas A. Dorsey” (Thom Granger, “Say ‘Amen,’ Somebody, Thomas Dorsey Remembered,” *CCM Magazine*, July 1999, p. 12).

CCM Magazine was not saying that Dorsey was the father of Christian music in general, but of contemporary Christian music in particular.

Dorsey was a pioneer in CCM in that he popularized the integration of sacred lyrics with sensual party music.

Dorsey was a filthy blues musician who performed under the name of Georgia Tom and joined hands with the likes of Tampa Red (Hudson Whitaker) and Ma Rainey. They enflamed the sinful passions of the patrons of juke joints, whorehouses, and gambling dens with vulgar lyrics set to a sensual, body-jerking backbeat blues rhythm.

“The two [Dorsey and Tampa Red] became so notorious for their cunningly erotic blues they coined a word for the style [hokum] and went on to name their duo after it, the Famous Hokum Boys” (*We’ll Understand It Better By and By: Pioneering African American Gospel Composers*, p. 180).

Pious blacks who took Jesus Christ and the Bible seriously and who were faithful to biblical churches, condemned the blues because of its intimate association with immorality and drunkenness and violence. This is clear from the histories that have been written of that time, such as the following:

“If you played blues, you played where people drank and gambled and carried on and committed adultery—all the things that the black church and the white church stood against: gambling, fornication, adultery, violence, murder” (Gayle Wardlow, *Chasin’ That Devil Music*, p. 144).

“Sex was inextricably linked with blues and jazz. It was not a prejudice: it was a fact of life. ... In truth, black parents were also disapproving of blues and jazz music, and often pulled out the broomstick when their daughters showed an interest in the ‘devil’s music’” (James Dickerson, *Goin’ Back to Memphis*, pp. 29,30).

Bluesman W.C. Handy was from a Christian home and both his grandfather and his father were preachers. When he brought a guitar home in his early teen years, his parents were shocked. Handy's father said: "A guitar! One of the devil's playthings. Take it away. Get it out of your hands. Whatever possessed you to bring a sinful thing like that into our Christian home?" (Handy, *Father of the Blues*, p. 10). It wasn't the guitar itself that was the problem, of course, it was its intimate association in that time and place with the filthy blues music and lifestyle. Handy's father rightfully believed that "becoming a [blues] musician would be like selling my soul to the devil" and that those who are living the licentious blues lifestyle are "trotting down to Hell on a fast horse" (Ibid., p. 303). Handy's Christian music teacher warned him that blues music would bring him to the gutter (Ibid., p. 303).

When Muddy Waters, who organized the first electric blues band, started learning to play the blues as a boy, his godly grandmother warned him: "Son, you're sinning. You're playing for the devil. Devil's gonna get you" (Bossman Bill *Monroe and Muddy Waters*, p. 105). Muddy Waters ignored his grandmother, but she was right. He operated a juke joint, sold moonshine, and ran gambling games. He put his first wife out of the house and brought in a girlfriend. He remarried and after the second wife died, he married a 25-year-old girl when he was 64 (Robert Palmer, *Deep Blues*). Many of his blues friends died young because of their "racy" lifestyles. For example, Henry Stong, harmonica player in Muddy Waters' band, was stabbed to death by his girlfriend at age 34 and bled to death in the back of Muddy's automobile.

When Charlie Patton started playing the blues, his preacher father looked upon it as a sin. "... when Bill [Charlie's father] caught his son making [blues] music, he considered it his Christian duty to deliver stern warnings and, as the warnings continued to go unheeded, increasingly severe corporal punishment" (Robert Palmer, *Deep Blues*, p. 51). Charlie ignored his father's godly discipline, wasted his life on liquor and loose women, and died at age 43 of a heart attack.

Jazz/blues researcher Gayle Dean Wardlow, who went house to house in black neighborhoods in search of old records, said: "I also discovered that women who were active churchgoers only had sacred music, never blues or jazz records" (Wardlow, *Chasin' That Devil Music*, p. 12).

It was not uncommon for blues players to get saved and become serious about serving God; and when they did, they usually gave up their blues music. An example was Ishmon Bracey (1900-1970). He played with some of the well-known bluesmen, including Tommy Johnson, and recorded for Victor and Paramount Records. He lived the immoral blues life for many years, but in 1951 he repented of his sin, trusted the Lord Jesus Christ as His Saviour, and returned to the Baptist church in which he was raised and became a preacher of the gospel. From then until his death of natural causes at age 70 he thanked the Lord for his conversion from the wicked life of blues. He refused thereafter even to play the blues recreationally. When interviewed in 1963 by blues researcher Gayle Dean Wardlow, Bracey described the immorality and violence that went on in the "juke houses" (*Chasin' that Devil Music*, pp. 58-60).

Thomas Dorsey, though, didn't repent of his old lifestyle nor reject his old music. He was "thoroughly unrepentant of his early career" (*Black Gospel: An Illustrated History*, p. 39). Instead, he brought his blues music into the churches in a move that eventually would leaven large numbers of black churches with the world. He was one of the fathers of black gospel music, which is an amalgamation of Christ with the world and the flesh. Dorsey called it "sacred blues," but when the sacred is mixed with the lusts of the world it ceases to be sacred. God's Word says there must be a difference between the holy or sacred and the profane (Ezek. 22:26; 44:23).

"He was appointed choir director at the Pilgrim Baptist Church in Chicago, but he stayed loyal to his former blues acolytes, since unlike many religious people, he never rejected the secular music" (*MusicHound Blues*, The Essential Album Guide).

At first, Dorsey's illicit mixing of the sacred with the sensual was widely resisted.

"The conservatives of his day branded it 'the devil's music' ... and found it unworthy to be played in churches" (*CCM Magazine*, July 1999, p. 12).

While many of the older people in the churches of that day resisted Dorsey's contemporary philosophy and sensual style, the young people loved it and it gradually gained the ascendance and brought spiritual ruin, for "a little leaven leaveneth the whole lump" (1 Cor. 5:6) and "he that soweth to his flesh shall of the flesh reap corruption" (Gal. 6:8).

Dorsey built a bridge over which generations of musicians and singers have crossed to the world from churches using sensualized music, typically resulting in spiritual destruction. A recent example is Whitney Houston, who died in February 2012 at age 48 from a combination of powerful prescription drugs mixed with liquor. She is one of countless individuals who have traveled the path from church choir to the filthy world of pop entertainment, crossing the well-worn bridge of contemporary "Christian" music.

All of the sincerity in the world won't stop the effect of breaking God's laws.

"Be not deceived: evil communications corrupt good manners" (1 Corinthians 15:33).

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